



Praise for



"Zoë Royster is as memorable in her own way as The Great Gilly Hopkins, Opal Buloni and Anne Shirley." — Kirkus, starred review

A 2010 ALA Notable Children's Book

An NCTE Notable Children's Book

A Kirkus Reviews Best Children's Book of the Year

A 2010 Bank Street College Best Book of the Year, Starred

A Capitol Choices 2010 Noteworthy Book

North Carolina Juvenile Literature Award

NAPPA Gold Award

Featured Review: Fuse #8, SLJ & Publishers Weekly

A Scholastic Instructor Best Kids' Book

Chicago Public Schools Women's History List

Maine Regional Library System Cream of the Crop

A Chapel Hill Public Library Best Book

ALAN Pick ☀️ Cybils Nominee

2010-11 NC Children's Book Award Nominee

Keystone State Young Adult Book Award Nominee

2010 YALSA BBYA Nominee

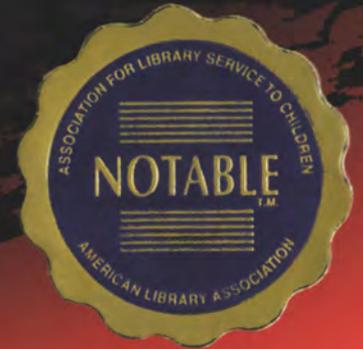
2010 ALA Amelia Bloomer List Nominee

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Reader  
Extras



clay carmichael



# Muses Are Everywhere

*clay carmichael*



he first inspiration for my novel *Wild Things* walked into my life on all fours. I wish I could say that I took one look at that filthy, hungry, strikingly handsome creature and saw immediately the muse he was, knew instantly that he would steal my heart and transform my life. But ashamed as I am to admit it, I took one look at my four-footed muse and ran him right out of the yard.

My muses have been non-standard from the start, when my father's Parkinson's disease inspired me to write and illustrate my first picture book—and this was at a time when I not only didn't illustrate, but hadn't planned on writing children's books at all. Maybe other writers are better at knowing a muse when they see one, but looking back now at mine, I see a lot of unlikely angels entertained unawares.

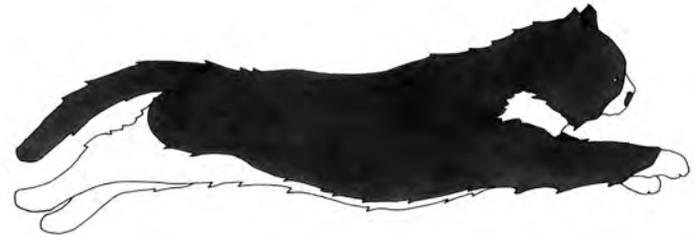
That dreary winter morning, I didn't see any angel. I glanced out my kitchen window and saw, crouched in the periwinkle under the bird feeder, an enormous black-and-white tomcat. His head was huge, a build-up of scar tissue from years of fighting, but I didn't know that then. He was black except for a white chest, stomach,

four white paws and a rough triangle of white around his muzzle that rose to a point between two green-gold eyes. To the right of his pink nose was his most distinguishing feature: an oval splotch of black, as though someone had stuck a thumb into black paint then pressed a solid, sideways thumbprint just there. His “half mustache” was as unmistakable as a tattoo, and gave him a goofy look. Goofy, except that his eyes were fixed on several sparrows and two brown rats feasting on fallen seeds. Goofy, except that he was poised to strike.



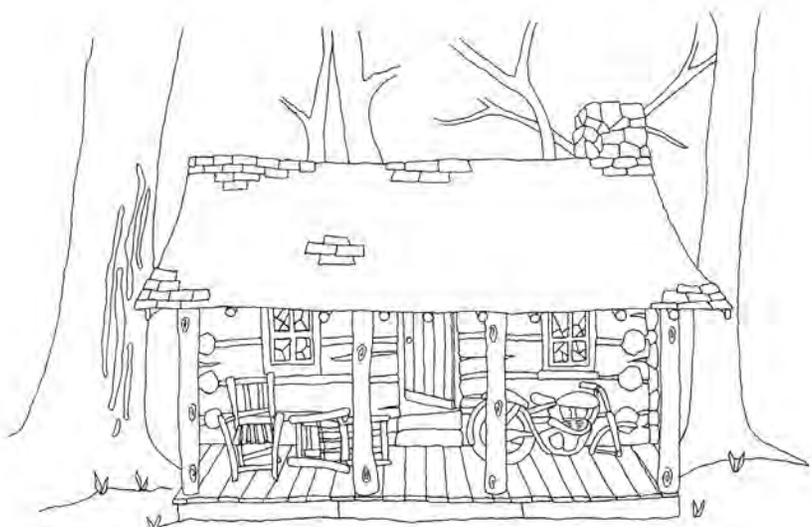
When I was a child growing up in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, my grandmother—a muse for both the grandmother and the intolerant churchwomen in *Wild Things*—watched *her birds*, as she called them, every afternoon at the kitchen window while she prayed the rosary. Though she’d become a Catholic after marrying my grandfather, her faith retained the pragmatic, reactionary character of her depression-era, Southern Baptist upbringing. Her feeders and statues of St. Francis welcomed some animals, but not others. She beheaded snakes with a hoe, bombed moles and voles in their tunnels, and poisoned chipmunks, mice and rats. She despised squirrels and fought her gray nemesis with greased poles, worthless baffles, idiotic-looking wire contrivances and relentless, unsuccessful craft. But though she hated squirrels, the antichrist would have been more welcome than a cat. So whenever I remember my grandmother perched on her step stool in afternoon prayer, I remember the cap pistol she kept on the counter beside her, and how at the sight of a squirrel or cat she left-fisted the rosary, right-handed the pistol and flew out the door firing and screeching, “Scat!”

grew up to disagree with my grandmother that there were good animals and bad animals, that the pretty and well-behaved ones should be fed and the ugly or troublesome ones beheaded, poisoned or gassed. Everyone ate at the birdfeeder behind my Carrboro, North Carolina house, even squirrels and the occasional mouse or rat. The mice and rats came from a neighbor’s compost pile and the next-door open field, which belonged to my friend Ruby King, another muse, who I made a friend of my eleven-year-old main character, Zoë, in *Wild Things*. But even though I fed all kinds of animals in my backyard, I did think it was wrong to entice creatures to a feeder so that other animals could hunt them there, so I shooed away the hawks, snakes and cats—including my own tabby—when I caught them hunting underneath. Which was why, on that winter morning, I did something I shall regret all my days. I imitated my grandmother, flew out the front door, raced to the side of the house and chased off that frightened, funny-faced cat.



At the time the cat came, I was learning to write and illustrate picture books for children. My then-husband, Sam, and I called our house the Love Bungalow, because whatever it lacked in comfort, it was full of that good feeling. It didn't have insulation or reliable plumbing. It barely had heat. A big kerosene furnace took up most of the living room, but only heated the house to fifty or sixty degrees. On cold days, we could see our breath in the two upstairs rooms and I wore gloves when I drew or typed. There were cracks in the outside walls we could see the front yard through. We filled them, but they opened up again as the house settled, and it

was always settling. A crack an inch or two wide ran through the living room floor and foundation; we called it the San Carrboro Fault. When it rained hard, the downstairs flooded. That house was surely my muse for the drafty forest log cabin my main character Zoë finds and fixes up in *Wild Things*.



**T**he winter the cat appeared the weather was unusually raw. Ice storms bowed the trees, and the wind cut more sharply into anything warm-blooded, doubling the number of hungry birds at the feeder. Now and then, I caught glimpses of the cat again from my upstairs study window, but he was always gone before I could run through the bedroom, down the backstairs, across the kitchen and outside to shoo him away—so I stopped bothering and began to watch him. His stark coloring made him stand out, as did the heavy way he walked, more like a lumbering lion than a house cat, though his stubby legs could sprint when they had to. He favored rats over poultry and unlike most cats, he never toyed with his prey before he killed it, which I admired.

I remember vividly the day I understood that his hunting was a matter of life and death, that he was all alone in the world. I had just

left my desk for lunch, and was walking by the bedroom window on the other side of the upstairs when I heard rustling in the leaves outside. I caught sight of him down below, hunched over something in the leaf litter. The area was overgrown with scraggly trees and privet; scattered with old tools, broken flowerpots, bricks and discarded clay pipe. He was tearing at something with his teeth and I saw he had killed a brown rat and was tearing off its fur in tufts to eat it, which he did, every edible bite. He ate quickly and ravenously, as the truly starving do. At first I felt sorry for the rat, then disgusted watching the cat eat it. But after a few minutes—which was all it took him to finish—I understood what I was really seeing: a lone, homeless, hungry animal surviving a hard winter as best he could. I realized he was wild.



These are the moments I live for as an author. The moments in a character's life where the heart shifts, where the eyes look, and for the first time really see. That was the day my own heart shifted and I saw the cat's life through his eyes. That was the day I began the first chapter of *Wild Things*, though it was years before I wrote a single word.

In time, and it took a long time, that wild black-and-white cat came to trust me, and only me, the way the fictional cat in *Wild Things* comes to trust my main character Zoë, who has huge trust issues of her own. I, like Zoë, was patient, and, as in the book, one day that cat just decided about me. His cat heart shifted. He was sunning himself in the yard when I pulled into the drive. He was wary, as usual, as I got out of the car, but this time he didn't bolt as I slowly approached him. Step by step I got closer, and closer still, and as I got to him he rolled over, showed me his belly and even let me scratch it. I have never felt so honored in my life.





hat was the beginning of our many years together and in those years we grew close. I called him Mr. C'mere, because "C'mere" was what he came to. During our time together, I wrote, illustrated and published three picture books. He made a cameo appearance in the third. He wasn't ever tame. Until he was quite old, he went off for weeks at a time and came home as spent and bloody as a drunken sailor from doing what tomcats do best. His story and eventful life went on for ten more years, but it was the early years and our mutual shifts of heart that I tried to capture in *Wild Things*.

Mr. C'mere and my first husband Sam died in the same year, within two months of each other. Mr. C'mere was very old, twenty the vet judged by his teeth. He died as peacefully as my husband did not. Loss is also a muse of *Wild Things*. The loss of love, of family, of home, of trust. At the beginning of *Wild Things*, the little girl Zoë has lost both her parents, along with any hope of a loving family, when her uncle Henry, a sculptor grieving the loss of his wife, takes her in.

But *Wild Things* isn't a tragic novel. In telling Zoë and the cat's story, I wanted to write about what comes after the pain and the loss, about the restoration of trust. I wanted to write about human and animal resilience, those mutual shifts of heart; about the power of love to heal the heart and transform it.

Which brings me to *Wild Things*' other primary muse. One night, about three years after Sam and Mr. C'mere died, I was at a friends' house admiring the beautiful stonework in their new outdoor pool, when I felt someone come up behind me, pick me up and dance me across the terrace. This someone was a sculptor, much like the sculptor I would later write about in *Wild Things*. He was someone I knew, though not well, but that changed pretty quickly. He and I were married six months later, and that was more than eight years ago. This muse I didn't chase off, or have to work to win over. Sometimes muses take matters into their own hands.



I don't want to make too much of the "real life" in my book. My friend, storyteller Donna Washington, says all her stories are true, except for the parts she makes up. I could name a dozen lesser muses. I could tell you, for instance, that the lifelike wooden animals the teen boy Wil carves in *Wild Things* were absolutely inspired by the beautiful wooden animal carvings of Carl Boettcher's *Circus Parade*, a magnificent moving fixture of my childhood in Chapel Hill, North Carolina; first in the Circus Room of the old Monogram Club where we bought our ice cream cones when we were kids, then in the old Carolina Inn cafeteria where I ate hundreds of meals with my family, and last, now, in the University of North Carolina Alumni Center, where I visit the circus from time to time. But I also need to say that *Wild Things* is a work of fiction, a story I made up. Though my life and people and animals I know and have known inform the story, the situations and characters in it are really alive only in my imagination, and, I hope, in the pages of the book. In all creative work—at least all of mine—life and imagination converge.

It's my belief that all stories have happy endings depending on where you end them. I think I left Zoë and her cat in a promising place at the

end of *Wild Things*. I live now very happily with my sculptor-husband in a beautiful sculpture-filled yard. Today, another mustachioed black-and-white cat from the shelter suns himself on the lawn. The house we live in, my muse Mrs. King's former house, has heat and decent plumbing and stays warm and dry when it rains.

**B**ut I can see the Love Bungalow, the drafty little house where I wrote my first book and met Mr. C'mere, from my studio window. And Mr. C'mere's stone grave stands at the edge of the sculpture garden. Both are daily reminders, as Zoë observes in *Wild Things*, that *things are beginning and ending, all in some measure, all the time*—that muses are everywhere.

Clay Carmichael

Address, North Carolina Literary Festival, 2009



## Interview with Author-Illustrator Clay Carmichael

An excerpt from author Zu Vincent's interview with Clay on the Through the Tollbooth blog, May 2010 ([http://community.livejournal.com/thru\\_the\\_booth](http://community.livejournal.com/thru_the_booth))

**ZV:** *Every so often a book comes along that makes me feel both honored and humble to be a writer. Wild Things is on my list. Zoë's voice grabbed me from the start (as did the voice of the wild cat Mr. C'mere) and wormed right into my heart. I know this book will be with me for a long time, and this is your debut novel!*

*Zoë is a funny, savvy and tough heroine. She's learned from a rough upbringing how to fend for herself, and the wildness in her is also her shield against heartbreak. Yet you don't ask your character to be tamed, but rather she uses her wild nature to open the world to others. I really appreciate this subtlety in Zoë's character. Can you talk about how character comes to you as a writer and how you capture character voice on the page? (I was drawn to this quote that initially sums Zoë up: "The worst thing about being a kid is that people twice my size with half my brains get to run my life.")*

**CC:** *"Yet you don't ask your character to be tamed, but rather she uses her wild nature to open the world to others."* This comment pleases me so much. I think Zoë's humor, savviness and toughness, while certainly survival and defense mechanisms, are also some of her best qualities. She's the definition of girl power. She is, as the Irish say, *herself*—her own passionate, wry, uncompromising person. She lives full out and instinctively puts herself on the line for what she believes in. She's fierce, holds her ground, a real fighter and not entirely likeable—qualities often admired in boy- but not girl-heroes. One reviewer called her valiant and I loved that.

I put a lot of myself in her character. Like Zoë, I'm tough-minded and direct. Like her, I had a mother who really shouldn't have been a parent. Like her, too, I was lucky that other loving adults stepped into my life, and I gave such adults to Zoë.

For me, characters—both good and bad—come from self, from people I know and love or can't love, and in large part through revision, which, for me, is where a character really deepens. After I've worked on a novel for a while, I get so I can hear every character in my head and each voice is like a different piece of music, unique and unmistakable.

**ZV:** *We not only come to love Zoë in this story, but the other characters that inhabit her world, who are all very alive in their own right. How do you as a writer develop characters who are both uniquely individual yet entirely human?*

**CC:** Thank you. As I say on the acknowledgments page, some characters in *Wild Things* are modeled after real people or animals. Others are composites or entirely imaginary. My sculptor-husband Mike Roig kindly posed for Zoë's sculptor-uncle Henry, and the cat is modeled on my real cat, Mr. C'mere. Harlan, one of my favorite characters, is a composite of a number of aimless but well-meaning sorts I've known.

A friend of my husband's says that the three most important things in life are: pay attention, pay attention, pay attention. Good advice for character formation. To which I would add: Listen, listen, listen, and revise, revise, revise.

P.S. I made up the white deer in the story, but a week after *Wild Things* came out, my friend Heather emailed me that a white deer had begun visiting her garden—synchronicity, if you ask me. (*photo, back cover*)

**ZV:** *Can you talk about the weave of art and prose and how it affected the writing of Wild Things? Was it a given that you would incorporate both mediums in the published book?*

**CC:** Yes, at least in my vision and in my conversations with Front Street's visionary Helen Robinson and Joy Neaves. *Wild Things* was offered, though, to other publishers and I have no way of knowing what might have happened to the art or story if Front Street had not published it. We authors fight for our visions, but we don't always win. Often, publishers, agents and the marketplace are out to tame you and your story, fit you and your work into some existing, saleable mold. One editor was interested only in the Zoë story and wondered if I might be willing to "ditch the cat." I still shudder to think.

**ZV:** *Called "near-feral" herself, Zoë is drawn to the other wild things living on the edge of society—be it cat or boy; meaning Zoë and Mr. C'mere aren't the only wild things in your story. In fact, we're led more and more deeply into nature and the nature of wildness as the story unfolds, making Wild Things more than just a wonderfully nuanced character novel, but a heart-stopping mystery and psychological thriller as well. How do you manage this blend of character and plot in your writing process? Which elements come to you most naturally, plot, character, or both?*

**CC:** I love the meditation this question inspires. I've always been fascinated with the tension between wild and tame in the human and animal heart. When we consent to be tamed or civilized in some respect (go to school or church, be "nice", dress an acceptable way, obey or "behave", adopt expected gender roles—the human list goes on and on and the animal list differs), what do we give up? Creativity? Passion? Freedom? Justice? Authenticity? Ourselves?

I manage the blend of plot and character as best I can, but it's challenging. When I was little, I remember performers on the old Ed Sullivan Show kept dozens of dishes aloft and spinning on tall poles. Managing plot, character, pacing, voice, etc, feels a bit like that. Character is most natural for me, so I let it take the lead. A couple of reviewers have thought that there is too much going on in *Wild Things*, but I find my plot's fullness more true to a contemporary child's life, as Zoë says: "things beginning and ending all in some measure all the time."

**ZV:** *It's gratifying to me as a reader to discover a protagonist like Zoë, who is after all only eleven, but whose story is told with such depth and understanding that her world is fully realized. This seems to me to be at the core of why certain literature speaks to us. Zoë herself finds this to be true when she discovers the meaning of art. Asked by her teacher to not simply tell about her uncle's art, but rather feel it, Zoë looks to "...find one piece that reached deep down inside me, tugged at my heart, or spoke my name." I found Wild Things to be a tribute both to the power of art and the power of story. Can you talk a bit about how visual art and books have influenced your evolution as a writer?*

Art and books have been a major part of my life since I was small. My grandparents lived next door and their house actually had a library—everyone's favorite room—where any important conversation took place but also where my grandparents read to us, and where we read by ourselves. I have a childhood photo of myself reading on the library couch—a couch I still own, very plush, with fold-down sides. There were shelves of art books and we kids used to pour over the paintings and illustrations. I talk a bit more about that library and childhood visual influences here: <http://www.winbooks.com/claycarmichael.htm>.

These days, because I'm married to a sculptor, beautiful art surrounds me every day. One morning Mike decided to make the sculpture Henry creates of Zoë and her cat in my book. (*photo, back cover*)

**ZV:** *The setting for your novel feels intuitive in that Zoë's uncle lives on the edge of a wood where wild things are still able to exist near civilization, and this wilderness is reflected in your novel's theme. How important is a sense of place—even wilderness—to you as a writer? Do you see a universal yearning or passion (or perhaps even a fear of) "wilderness" that writers and artists have to face? I was struck by an exchange between Zoë and her uncle when they set a wind sculpture in the yard. Zoë says of the sculpture, "This is a one-of-a-kind, one-hundred-percent-guaranteed combination universal craziness deflector luck magnet and wild thing." And her uncle replies, "Otherwise known as a work of art."*

**CC:** Place is very much a main character in *Wild Things*, and not just North Carolina where I have spent most of my life, but the fictional Sugar Hill as well. Generations of Zoë's and Henry's family have lived on this land. Zoë's whole family lives on or is buried under the land she explores and it's the only place where the whole clan, living and dead, is together.

Henry's art is also rooted in this in-between place. Making art, for Henry and for me, is a way to find meaning and order in life's chaos, one means of keeping the wilderness at bay—in Zoë's and Henry's case, I think, the wilderness of the past. Wilderness, whatever its forms—whether sorrow, alcoholism, sickness, Mother Nature—takes over if you let it. Here in the south, the honeysuckle and wisteria are beautiful, but if left unchecked, they kill whatever they grow on. The cat knows he's getting too old to live any longer completely wild. For him and for Zoë, a certain amount of capitulation is necessary for survival—and love. Too much wildness is as undesirable as too much tameness. The smart ones, like Zoë and her cat, keep to the in-between place, and thrive authentically, denizens of both worlds. 🐾



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